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RETURNS OF THE DAY

by

ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

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By

ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

Author of "How it Feels to be Fifty," "Goat-Feathers," "Ghosts what Ain't," etc.

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MANY HAPPY RETURNS OF THE DAY!

THERE is one thing every person has. He may not own a dog or an automobile or a wooden leg, but he has a birthday of his own. Even women have them; they had them before they got the vote.

In a country the size of this, with something like one hundred and ten million inhabitants and only three hundred and sixty-six days in the biggest year now in use, three hundred thousand or more people have birthdays every day. Figures like these astound the intelligence and make reason totter on her throne. Just think! If each of the persons

having a birthday to-day received but one birthday card four inches in length, and those cards were placed end to end, they would make a row of birthday cards one hundred thousand feet or more than nineteen miles long, and the cost, if figured at only ten cents each, would be thirty thousand dollars. I wonder why I never went into the birthday-card business!

My own birthday, the one I keep for my private use, comes on the fifth day of December, rain or shine, even when that day falls on Sunday. I have had it since 1869, and it is getting thin in spots and is not as fresh and crisp as it was. It is beginning to look like a dollar bill that has been in circulation since Grant was

President; but even at that I get a certain amount of cheer out of it, as I shall explain later.

There was a time when my birthday was a mighty important event. For twelve months you might wake me up any night and ask me how old I was and I would say, 'Eight, going on nine,' and the moment I opened my eyes on December 5th I was 'nine, going on ten,' and the most important job I had was to look forward to the next birthday, when I would be 'ten, going on eleven.'

But I've got over that. I'm not so crazy about birthdays any more. I don't worry about whether or not they are going to come; I have a feeling that they are going to come

along right regularly, whether I fret about them or not. And I don't spend much time saying to myself, 'I'm ninety-nine, going on a hundred,' or whatever my age may be. I'm not interested. If anybody asks me, suddenly, how old I am, I have to subtract 1869 from 1925, and I'm likely to miss the correct answer by ten or twenty years. And that does not bother me, either.

December has always been a favorite birthday month in our family. My birthday arrives a few days after I have the last tulip bulbs in the ground, and my father's is six days later, and my boy's dog's birthday is two days after that. The dog does not get many letters con-

cerning his birthday, but I do — I get quite a number, and a good many are from people I don't know at all. That is because some newspaper syndicate has included me in a daily feature entitled something like 'Who Was Born To-day.' I suppose the people who read those birthday dates think it is not much use writing to Adam or Moses or the man who invented suspenders, they being too considerably elsewhere, so they write to me.

So, every year, I get quite a few birthday letters from these unknown friends. And I like to get them, too. But I do think there is just a little too much suggestion in some of them of an idea that means, 'Well, you poor old fish, here's an-

other of your years gone — *you'll* be through before long!'

I don't like that; I don't vote that ticket. Being a good-natured man — except in the bosom of my family — I have to write a line or two to those people and say, 'Thanks for your kind birthday wishes, you have touched my heart'; but what I would like to write is, 'Go on! You'll probably be dead twenty years before I am; go weep on your own shoulder.' I can't concede that I'm crazy to be the sort of man who looks up from his tulip-planting and gazes at his neighbor and draws a long face and sighs, and says, 'Yes, yes! I'm a year older to-day — before long they'll put me in the box with the silver handles and plant

me a little deeper than the tulip bulbs.'

When I was a boy out in Iowa, I had a friend who had a grandaunt named Petunia Mullins, and every time her birthday came around he coaxed me to go with him when he took a present to her. He hated to go alone, and I did not blame him. He would climb the stairs to her flat and hesitate at the door and then tap on it reluctantly, and when she opened to him he would screw his face into a bright, sunny smile and hand her the nice hand-embroidered teapot or silver-plated handkerchief, and cry merrily, 'Happy birthday, Aunt Petunia!' And when she had taken the present and had looked for the tag to see how much

it had cost, she would roll up her eyes and snuffle and say, 'Yes, yes! it is the sad day; I won't be with you much longer, William.'

Up the river from us a few miles another of the boys had an uncle. I'll call him 'Uncle Pethcod,' because Pethcod is a name I don't care much for, and I never cared much for this man. I rowed up there in a skiff with this Uncle Pethcod's nephew on one of his birthdays. It was a beautiful day — a bright sunny day — and Sam handed his uncle a classy wall calendar all wrapped up in tissue paper and tied with a blue ribbon. The calendar was a lovely thing, with a Gibson girl on it in eight colors, and just as good as when Sam received it for Christ-

mas, except that it was a little smudged in one place where Sam had rubbed out the '25 cts.' and put '$1.50' in place of it. It was a calendar any one should have been glad to own, and it should have given that uncle a thrill of happiness; but when he had pulled off its wrappings he looked at it sadly and shook his head. 'Thank you, Samuel, thank you,' he said. 'I always loved calendars, but I don't expect I'll get full use out of this one. I shouldn't wonder if I would be naught but a cold blue corpse laid underground before all the days on this calendar have passed.'

Somehow that seemed to cast an unnecessary gloom over an otherwise perfectly good occasion. And

the worst of it was that the old man was wrong, entirely wrong, because it was a last year's calendar and the days on it had already passed. He might as well have been cheerful about it.

Sometimes I think we make too much of this birthday business in this country, or go at it the wrong way, or something. We look on our birthdays as if our years were a pile of twenty-dollar bills and the birthday was the day we spent the last cent of one and broke the next into small change. I can't see a birthday in that light at all; I don't become a year older on my birthday; the longest birthday I ever live can't make me more than twenty-four hours older than I was

the day before, and that's nothing to get excited about. Every day does that to me.

If you look at this thing properly, a birthday is no more important than any one of the million ticks of a clock as the hands proceed at a regular pace around the dial. When the hands point to twelve the clock strikes twelve — or, if it is like some clocks I've owned, it strikes eleven or twenty-two or sixteen — but that doesn't mean an hour has jumped past at that moment. The clock doesn't go over in a musty corner and sob, 'Here's another twelve hours gone — in a few more hours I'll be junk!' You bet it doesn't! It knows better. Nothing has happened, except that

another second has gone by in exactly the usual way. That's nothing to make a man blue — or a woman either.

I know a man who is so pessimistic that if you make him a present of a brand-new silver dollar he will turn it over and over trying to see if he can't discover that one side of that dollar is darker than the other side of it. A silver dollar, spang-new from the mint, has no dark side, but that doesn't bother this fellow — if that dollar has no dark side he picks out one side and *calls* it the dark side, and that's the only side of that dollar you can ever get him to look at.

A couple of years ago we had a long and cold and hard winter and

there was a lot of snow. I was going downtown the first warm day that spring, and the snow had melted considerably, and I met this dark-side fellow at his gate. Where the snow had melted in his yard the grass was rich and green, and where the sun was strongest a dandelion had opened.

'Well,' I said, 'there's a dandelion! That looks good; that looks as if spring was here at last.'

The dark-side citizen looked at the dandelion and all the joy of living went out of him in an instant.

'Yes, yes!' he said. 'That's the way it goes; it will be winter again before we know it!'

That man would never in this world think of his birthday as a

joyous celebration of the fact that he was lucky to be born. I never asked him, but I'll bet he considers his birthdays nothing but advance warnings of his approaching death. And that's a fine way to celebrate!

When I lived out in Iowa as a boy, I knew a charming old lady who gave herself a small birthday party every year. She always had a little dinner party on that day and invited a few of her dearest friends, and as my aunt was one of those friends and I was living with my aunt I was invited too. To me, dear Mrs. Van's birthday parties were always a great event. I always looked forward to them eagerly and was glad she had been born, and one reason was that always, as

we left after dinner, Mrs. Van gave each of us a little parcel of some sort, and in it was a birthday present.

I cannot now remember what most of the presents she gave me were; I only remember that one of them was a majolica saucer, shaped and colored like a pale green lettuce leaf, and it must have cost all of ten cents. I kept that saucer for years, and it was one of the things I was fondest of, just as a boy is always fond of a thing he has no use for and that is especially inappropriate for him.

That majolica saucer, presented to me on her birthday by that cultured elderly lady, probably said to me, 'You see! Mrs. Van knows

you are not a mere clodhopper; she knows you appreciate Art. Other folks may think you can't appreciate anything but brown molasses taffy and dead cats and buckwheat cakes and useful things of that sort, but Mrs. Van knows you can treasure finer and better things, such as genuine majolica lettuce leaves.'

We can't tell what effect such seemingly trivial things have on our lives. Possibly owning that majolica saucer stirred my young heart with a desire to have a home of my own that I could put majolica saucers in, thus leading me to want to have a wife, and twins, and other children, and gas bills, and be a respected citizen with taxes to pay. If it had not been for that ma-

jolica saucer I might have grown up with no thought of home. I might have rushed away in some fit of bitter anger at the woodpile, and have become a lone wolf and ended by being a Mexican bandit. I might have become an outcast, wearing a belt to keep my pants up, instead of wearing one because suspenders are not fashionable.

It has always seemed to me that Mrs. Van's custom of giving presents on her birthday indicated that she considered her birthday a day on which to remember that it was good to have been born and to be alive. She was glad she had been born, and she wanted others to be glad, so she gave them presents. You would imagine, when you see

how some people hate the coming of their birthdays, that there was some law of nature that declared that a man must inevitably die on the same day of the year as that on which he was born — that his birthday was also his deathday. If that were so, I might have some reason to hang up a bunch of crape and write for prices on coffins, plain and fancy, as my birthday approached.

If any of you want to think of your birthdays as a sort of subpœna to prepare to meet your doom, go ahead and do so — I don't want to. I don't even want to think of my birthday as a hint that another year is gone. I want my birthday celebrated by me as the one strictly personal festival I have on the calendar.

I'm willing to put on a clean shirt and go out and whoop it up on Washington's Birthday, and I'm willing to join in with the rest of the boys and hurrah on Lincoln's Birthday, but Washington and Lincoln are neither of them half as important to me as I am to myself, and when my birthday comes I want to get a little fun out of it, even if no one else does.

I don't want to think of it as a mere memorandum that three hundred and sixty-five days have passed away during the last fifty-two weeks of time. I wouldn't call that much of a birthday. If that was all I wanted a birthday for, I could use any other day just as well. I can look sober and say, 'Well, another

year is gone,' on December 16th or June 10th or on the Fourth of July or October 3d or any other day. A 'year' ends every day of the year; a 'year' ends at every tick of the clock, doesn't it?

One of the saddest cases on record is that of Emmett C. Stocks, late of Cebada, Iowa. Emmett was born at Cebada, and he had a sister Aurelia who was born in the same place; but when she was twenty-four she married a man named Finch and moved to Oregon. Emmett was three years younger than Aurelia — or so he supposed — and he lived with his Uncle Peter Stocks and worked in his notion store. He got five dollars per week at first and paid his Uncle Peter three dol-

lars per week board, but when Emmett reached his twenty-first birthday his Uncle Peter did what he had always promised to do and raised Emmett's pay to ten dollars per week.

Things went along this way for a few years and then Emmett's Uncle Peter died and the notion store gave up its ghost, and Emmett went to work in the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank in Cebada, and he was so well fitted to the banking business that in ten years he was president of the bank, owned nine tenths of the stock, and possessed thirty thousand dollars' worth of mortgages on the outside.

A year after having been made president of the bank, Emmett

married Ruth Filsom, whose father owned the Cebada Dairy, and in due time they had four fine children — two boys and two girls — and Emmett built a swell house on the lot cater-cornered from the Methodist Church.

The man who told me about Emmett said that all his life Emmett was the happiest and most contented man ever known in Cebada. He used to go around town humming a little tune and chewing a couple of cardamom seeds, picking up first and second mortgages that he found lying around loose, and people often spoke of him, and said that if ever there was a man who looked happy and was happy, Emmett Stocks was that man.

Things went on like this until Emmett was sixty-nine years old. On his sixty-ninth birthday he gave a party and invited all his friends, and his wife built a dandy birthday cake for the occasion with sixty-nine little red candles on it and 'E. S.' traced out in red peppermints on the icing.

Just before he cut the cake, Emmett made a little speech. He thanked those present for the gifts they had brought and said his finest feelings had been touched by the love and affection shown him, and that they would have to pardon him if his voice trembled, because when he thought how greatly blessed he had been he was close to tears.

He had to stop for a moment

right there to control himself; but he went on and said he had the dearest wife and the best children, and that the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank was in fine financial condition and paying thirty-two per cent annually and he had nothing to kick about and a lot to be glad for. Then he said he was now sixty-nine years old, but he did not feel it.

He said he knew that seventy years was the time allotted to man on this earth by the Psalmist, and he would not kick about that — he had had sixty-nine perfect years; and if the Psalmist's rule came true in his case he would still have one glorious year ahead of him, and he would be satisfied and happy and content. He said he knew he would live un-

til he was seventy, because he felt like a boy and his liver was in good condition and he had never had any stomach trouble to speak of.

He was going on to say that he here and now invited one and all to come to his birthday party a year from then, when Obed Riggs, the assistant postmaster of Cebada, pushed into the room. He was panting a little, because he had run all the way from the post-office. The evening mail had arrived and among it was a package for Emmett, all the way from Oregon, and Obed guessed rightly that it was a birthday present from Emmett's sister Aurelia, and he had hurried to put it in Emmett's hands.

When he saw Aurelia's name and

address in the corner of the package Emmett smiled a happy smile and asked permission to open the package before he went on with his speech because, he said, this was the crowning happiness of the occasion — a gift from his beloved sister Aurelia. So he took the knife with which he had been going to cut the cake, and cut the cord that bound the package.

'It's a book,' he said. 'Aurelia knows I like books.'

Then he removed the paper wrapper and looked at the book, and more tears filled his eyes, because he knew in an instant what the book was. It was the old Stocks Family Bible. He opened the book and the volume parted at the place

between the Old and New Testaments where the closely written pages of 'Family Records' began with a page of 'Births.'

Emmett ran his eyes down this page, and then he came to the record of his own birth, and the smile that had been on his face slowly faded out. In its place came a look of horror and despair. There could be no doubt about it, he had to believe his own eyes — he was not sixty-nine years old, he was seventy.

From that moment Emmett Stocks was a changed man. He closed the Bible and looked around the room with a woe-begone countenance, and after a moment he turned and went out and climbed

the stairs to his bedroom, and undressed and got into bed. For six days he lay there speechless, with the tears streaming down his face, and on the seventh day he died.

Of course, there was all sorts of talk about this in Cebada. Some of the meaner folks, those who owed Emmett money, said the reason he sickened and died was because he remembered that his Uncle Peter had promised to give Emmett that five-dollar raise on Emmett's twenty-first birthday and, because Emmett was mistaken in his birthday, the increased pay had not begun until Emmett was twenty-two, and that thus Emmett had lost five dollars a week for a solid fifty-two weeks, back in 1864, and that the

thought had been too much for him. But that was not the real reason. The real reason was that Emmett Stocks had become so used to feeling as old as his birthdays told him he ought to feel, that the sudden shock of learning that he was a year older than he had figured simply killed him. Since I heard about Emmett Stocks, I've quit using my birthdays to tell time by. It's not safe.

When I was in Paris I attended a birthday party there. It was strictly a family affair; but the young man who was celebrating was the son of the lady who owned the *pension* where I was staying, and as I had paid part of my board bill that week

I was considered one of the family. I can't say the affair was very riotous. Members of the family from near and far sat around the edge of the room on stiff-backed chairs and nibbled small cakes and sipped thin wine, and conversed gently in a sedate manner. I did not do much conversation myself, the only French I knew at that time being 'low show,' which means 'hot water,' and somehow that did not seem to work into the conversation advantageously. No matter how good a man's intentions are, or how willing he may be to make an affair a success, he is apt to be misunderstood if he breaks into the middle of a family talk, uttering 'hot water' in a loud voice.

In some ways that birthday party in Paris seemed more like a highly respectable funeral than we think birthday parties should seem; but one had only to look at the young man who was the leading gentleman in the affair to know it was not a funeral. He grinned more than the corpse usually does, and seemed to be a lot more uncomfortable, but he certainly enjoyed it all and was proud to be celebrated that way. As a usual thing, I try to take a prominent part in affairs and to be the life of the party, telling amusing jokes about Pat and Mike; but this time I merely sat around and looked intelligent until the affair was over, and then I came out strong. When every one present kissed the

young man on both cheeks I refrained from kissing him and shook his hand instead, and this gave the party a sort of international aspect and made it a great success.

But what I like best about the French annual doings is that when a man celebrates his birthday there he calls it his 'fête-day,' which means a feast-day or festival-day. And usually it is not his birthday at all; it is the day in the calendar consecrated to the particular saint whose name he bears, if any. That certainly takes a lot of sting out of birthdays and makes them more joyous and care-free, just as if I had been named Independence Butler and had a right to celebrate myself on the Fourth of July. A 'fête-day'

suggests something to celebrate with some sort of hurrah, a person's own Christmas or Thanksgiving, as if everybody ought to be glad I was born. 'Birthday' is too apt to suggest nothing but that the clock has ticked again, that another coupon has been torn from my seventy-trip book, that another hole has been punched in my meal-ticket.

I'll bet you never saw a magazine come out on its fiftieth anniversary with a black mourning border around the front cover and an editorial saying, 'Alas! This magazine is fifty years old now, and just that much nearer death!' No, sir! It prints the picture of a lovely young girl on the cover, and the ed-

itorial says, 'Hurrah, boys! We're fifty years old and going strong and we'll probably live forever.'

The idea that every birthday shortens your life is all nonsense. The truth is that every birthday is a guarantee that you will live longer than you ever had any right to think you would. Every birthday you reach puts your probable deathday further into the future.

When I was twenty-one I went to a young doctor to be examined for life insurance purposes, and when he had pawed me all over and listened to my interior clockwork he drew a mighty long face.

'I'll pass you,' he said, 'but I should not do it. You have a heart.

You may go along until you are about forty, and then your heart will begin to kick up and you won't be able to do any more work, and a couple of years later you'll be walking along the street some day, and you'll stop short with an expression of surprise and immediately enter the pearly gates.'

Twenty years ago I was examined for insurance again. The doctor this time was no friend of mine, and I had never seen him before. He pawed over me and stuck new and improved appliances against me fore and aft — megaphones and dictaphones and so on. When he was through he asked me if I had had a good night's rest the night before. I told him the truth. I said I had had

a regular Hades of a time. I said my baby daughter was teething and I had walked the floor with her three quarters of the night and she yelling bloody murder. Then I asked him if he asked because there was anything serious the matter with me, and he said there was not. He said the heart action showed I had not rested well at night lately, but it was nothing important.

A few days ago I was examined again, and once more for life insurance, and again I did not know the doctor from Adam. In the twenty years that had passed, a whole new lot of testing appliances have been invented, and by the time the doctor had them all clamped on me I looked like a three hundred dollar

car decorated with five hundred dollars' worth of accessories. When the doctor had walked around me a couple of dozen times, studying the dials and reading the indexes, he gave his opinion—I was as sound as a nut: heart all right, blood pressure all right, lungs all right, everything all right. Not a thing the matter with me. So I'm younger than when I was twenty-one. When I was twenty-one I was sure to be dead at forty-four; now I'm fifty-five and if my great-grandchildren ever want to get rid of me they will probably have to use an axe on me sometime along about 1974.

The insurance companies, to whom such things mean success or failure, have been collecting sta-

tistics and compiling tables for many long years, and they base their business on those charts and tables. All those charts prove that, at least until you are ninety-five years old, you should celebrate every birthday with joy.

Suppose, for a moment, you were born in 1855. Dr. Louis I. Dublin, a New York insurance statistician, says that the first 'Expectation of Life' table of any value, in the United States, was compiled in Massachusetts in 1855. This set the expectation of life at forty years. In other words, the average baby born in 1855 had a right to expect to live to be forty. In 1910 the figure had increased to fifty-one years.

In 1920 it was over fifty-five years, and Dr. Dublin believed that campaigns to reduce the worst diseases, together with improved sanitary conditions and better standards of living, might add ten years to that. In 1924, in his report to Congress, Surgeon-General Cumming, of the Public Health Service, said fifty-six years was now the average span of life in America, and contrasted it with the sixteenth century when the average life was between eighteen and twenty years. So, you see, every time you celebrate your birthday you can also celebrate the improved sanitary conditions and new conquests of disease that mean you should live longer than you thought you would

when you celebrated your birthday a year ago.

But this is not all. There is another reason why you should celebrate your birthday with gladness if continuing life is what interests you.

There is a table called 'American Experience Table of (Insured) Mortality,' that represents the facts and figures that have been dug out through many years. If you look at this table you'll see that, when ten thousand boys reach the age of ten years, they have a right to look forward to an average future life of (about) forty-nine years. Suppose you are that boy and you are ten years old, you have a right to say, 'Well, the chances are, taking the

average, that I'll live to be fifty-nine.' So there's no use worrying until you are fifty-eight, is there? But, if, when you reach the age of fifty-eight, you look at the table again you'll see that the 'average future life in years' for a man aged fifty-eight is (about) fifteen years. So the average chance is that you are *not* going to die at fifty-nine, after all; the average chance is that you are going to live to be seventy-three. So there is no need to take stock again until you are seventy-two, and when you are seventy-two and look at the table you find that the 'average future life in years' of a man seventy-two years old is (about) seven and one half years, and you have a fair right to

expect to live to be seventy-nine and one half. And if you consult the table when you are seventy-nine you'll see you have an average chance of living four and three fourths years longer, which will make you eighty-four years and three months old. And when you are eighty-four the table says you still have an average expectation of living three years longer. That ought to be almost long enough for anybody, I should think, but even when you reach the rather mature age of eighty-seven, there's no need of celebrating your birthday with a grouch, because the table gives the eighty-seven-year-old boys an average of two and one sixth years more.

Many Happy Returns of the Day

Every time you reach a new birthday you shove your average expectation of life further into the future. At nineteen you were due to be dead when you were fifty-nine, and at eighty-seven you are due to live two and one sixth years more!

That's how Methuselah, the son of Enoch, did it — every time his birthday came around he invited the neighbors in and gave three hearty cheers. And he lived to be nine hundred and sixty-nine years old, and he wouldn't have died then except that it got to be too much trouble to serve ice-cream and cake to all his great-great-great-grandchildren on his birthdays.

You can put this another way if you want to. The table would run something like this:

At 10 you have about 85 chances out of 10,000 of living to be 90.
At 30 you have about 99 chances out of 10,000 of living to be 90.
At 50 you have about 121 chances out of 10,000 of living to be 90.
At 70 you have about 214 chances out of 10,000 of living to be 90.
At 89 you have about 6041 chances out of 10,000 of living to be 90.

I don't claim that the above figures are absolutely accurate, but they are accurate enough. They show that every time you have a birthday your chances of living to a fine old age get better instead of worse. I think that is a good reason for welcoming our birthdays with glee.

When I reached my fiftieth birthday I absolutely stopped worrying about dying before I was forty-five years old. And I stopped worrying about dying before I'm ninety, too. How can I tell? Maybe I'm the man Nature has picked out to beat Methuselah's record and pile up one thousand years. The only thing about that that worries me is my hair; I can see now that my hair is never going to last that long. Unless I grow a second crop.

Last year when my boy's dog had a birthday, we had a birthday cake for him, with red candles on it. I am willing to swear before any notary in the United States that he did not look at it sadly and sigh

and say, 'Yes, yes! Another year gone! A few more sad and doleful years and it will be all over with me and I'll trouble you no more.' No, sir! He pitched right in and ate the cake with the utmost joy. Then he ate the candles.

Perhaps it was because he is a fox terrier and has a naturally optimistic and scrappy disposition, but I doubt it. What I think is that when we wished him a happy birthday he did not have the slightest notion what we were talking about. Time and birthdays and calendars and clocks and minutes and such things don't mean anything to him; he does not live by the year, he lives by the number of gray cats he can chase up trees. When you hand

him a birthday cake, he doesn't consider it a warning of approaching dissolution; he considers it joy-food and treats it as such.

How many people do you know who began mourning their birthdays years and years ago and are still kicking around? Dozens probably.

If birthdays mean anything at all, they mean that the good old clock is still ticking along the same as usual, and is likely to continue to do so. The world has never been improved much by the men who get up in meeting and read reports beginning, 'I am sorry to report that the year just closed—' The fellows who push things along are those who begin with 'I am glad to

announce that the year just beginning — '

When it comes to birthday presents, it is all right to accept with thanks what the other fellow gives you, whether it is a silver-plated ash-receiver or a green necktie; and it is all right, if you wish, to celebrate the day by handing out to your friends majolica saucers that look like lettuce leaves; but the best birthday gift possible is to hand yourself every birthday morning three hundred and sixty-five new and unused days, any one of which may turn out to be the best day you ever had in your life.

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